

*“A player, a playwright, and the most famous poet  
in the world”:*

## *Highs and Lows in The Player Queen*

*“Um jogador, um dramaturgo e o poeta mais famoso do  
mundo”:* *Altos e baixos em The Player Queen*

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**Abstract:** *Yeats published The Player Queen, a play he had struggled with for more than a decade, in 1922, just a year before he was awarded the Nobel Prize. This article argues that despite its appearance of complete wackiness, The Player Queen constitutes a significant landmark in Yeats’s elaboration of his own theatrical aesthetics, as well as a meditation on artistic responsibility—or failure thereof. Why does the poet Septimus fail to communicate his beautiful vision of the Unicorn to anyone, and why does no-one in the play listen to him? On the one hand, the citizens in the play are figures of the incompetent spectators, reminiscent of the audience who rejected Synge at the Abbey. On the other hand, Septimus himself is an incompetent spectator, who is so engrossed in his poetic vision that he fails to pay attention to the momentous change that is really going on before his eyes, although this concerns his own wife Decima, the eponymous Player Queen who comes to replace the real queen. Septimus fails to make himself heard because he is not paying attention to what really matters, he is not fulfilling his duty, as a playwright and a poet, of translating the shapeless chaos of reality into intelligible forms.*

**Keywords:** *W.B. Yeats; Drama; Nobel Prize; The Player Queen; Gender Politics; Responsibility; Farce; Dramaturgy.*

**Resumo:** *Yeats publicou The Player Queen, uma peça com a qual se debateu durante mais de uma década, em 1922, apenas um ano antes de lhe ser atribuído o Prêmio Nobel. Este artigo argumenta que, apesar da sua aparência de completa loucura, The Player Queen constitui um marco significativo na elaboração por Yeats da sua própria estética teatral, bem como uma meditação sobre a responsabilidade artística*

– ou o seu fracasso. Por que o poeta Septimus não consegue comunicar sua bela visão do Unicórnio a ninguém, e por que ninguém na peça o ouve? Por um lado, os cidadãos da peça são figuras de espectadores incompetentes, que lembram o público que rejeitou Synge na Abadia. Por outro lado, o próprio Septimus é um espectador incompetente, que está tão absorto em sua visão poética que não consegue prestar atenção à importante mudança que está realmente ocorrendo diante de seus olhos, embora isso diga respeito à sua própria esposa Decima, a Rainha Jogadora que vem para substituir a verdadeira rainha. Septimus não consegue se fazer ouvir porque não está prestando atenção ao que realmente importa, não está cumprindo seu dever, como dramaturgo e poeta, de traduzir o caos sem forma da realidade em formas inteligíveis.

**Palavras-chave:** *W.B. Yeats; Drama; Prêmio Nobel; The Player Queen; Políticas de gênero; Responsabilidade; Farsa; Dramaturgia.*

When W.B. Yeats delivered his acceptance speech after being awarded the Nobel prize for literature in 1923, he surprised everyone by telling the committee in Stockholm, “Perhaps the English committees would never have sent you my name if I had written no plays” (Yeats 1923)– a suggestion that continues to cause sustained hilarity among the many scholars and critics who tend to dismiss his work for the stage as theatrically inept, incomprehensible and excruciatingly tedious. (The slightly more nuanced but no less condescending variation on this view is that the plays, especially those written in verse, contain some magnificent poetry, despite being terminally unstageable). Yeats was in fact awarded the Prize, in the words of the Nobel Committee, “for his always inspired poetry, which in a highly artistic form gives expression to the spirit of a whole nation.”<sup>1</sup> With a characteristic mixture of arrogance and self-irony, he seems to have anticipated and playfully sabotaged this consecration in *The Player Queen*, a play on which he had toiled for a decade between 1908 and 1917 and which had finally been published in November 1922, just a year before he received the news that he had been awarded the Nobel and, finding the wine cellar empty, celebrated with George by cooking sausages (Yeats 1999, 392-93). In the first scene of *The Player Queen*, Septimus, who has just arrived in an unnamed small town with a company of actors, introduces himself to the locals as he roams the streets in a drunken stupor at dawn: “I am Septimus, a player, a playwright, and the most famous poet in the world.” This self-description briefly elevates him to the heights of success and glory, but he immediately comes crashing down when Second Man responds: “That name, sir, is unknown to me”

(Yeats 2001, 340). Not only has no-one in town ever heard of Septimus, but in the course of the few hours in which the frantic events of the play are condensed, he is at best ignored, at worst repeatedly and more or less violently silenced, and eventually expelled out of the city and kingdom. While Septimus's descent into anonymity continues throughout the play, it is contrasted with the steady elevation of his wife Decima, who rises from Player Queen to real Queen. Despite its appearance of utter wackiness, I argue that *The Player Queen* constitutes a significant landmark in Yeats's elaboration of his own theatrical aesthetics, as well as a meditation on artistic responsibility –or failure thereof. Why is it, I ask, that no-one pays any attention to Septimus? Why is he treated as a complete nonentity, and why does he fail to communicate his beautiful vision of the Unicorn to anyone? On the one hand, the citizens in the play are figures of the incompetent spectators; they are the obtuse, vulgar audience who rejected Synge at the Abbey, the philistines who “fumble in a greasy till” and fail to receive Septimus's otherworldly vision because their imagination won't stretch beyond the limits of the known and familiar. However, I also argue that Septimus himself is an incompetent spectator, that he is so engrossed in his poetic vision that he fails to pay attention to the momentous change that is really going on before his eyes, although this concerns his own wife Decima, the eponymous Player Queen who comes to replace the real queen. Septimus fails to make himself heard, I suggest, because he is not paying attention to what really matters, he is not fulfilling his duty, as a playwright and a poet, of translating the shapeless chaos of reality into intelligible forms.

Yeats started work on *The Player Queen* in 1908, at a time when he was beginning to feel disillusioned with the Abbey and estranged from the Dublin audience who had given such a poor show of themselves a year before during the *Playboy* riots. As Noreen Doody points out in her study of *The Influence of Oscar Wilde on WBY*, Yeats was then reading Wilde's *De Profundis* as well as his essays, and was much impressed with Wilde's emphasis on “the power of image and the necessity for self-creation” (Doody 112) through the assumption of a chosen mask, a notion which also resonated with his reading of Nietzsche. As Yeats began to develop his own doctrine of the mask as anti-self, he initially conceived *The Player Queen* as a tragedy in verse which might express his thought allegorically, but found himself in an impasse. As he wrote in 1922 in his note to the play, “I wasted the best working months of several years in an attempt to write a poetical play where every character became an example of the finding or not finding of what I have called the Antithetical Self; and because passion and not thought makes tragedy, what I made had neither simplicity nor life” (Yeats 2001, 698). After unsuccessfully completing nine scenarios and three extant scripts for the play, he put it aside in frustration in 1910,

but could not quite give it up, and picked it up again in 1915. His own theory of the mask had by then evolved considerably, and he was beginning to theorise it in a highly personal philosophical essay which was to become *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*. Again, Yeats struggled with *The Player Queen*, and as Richard Ellmann has revealed, it was Pound who eventually suggested that Yeats rewrite the play as a farce rather than a tragedy (Ellmann 215), finally freeing Yeats from his creative block and allowing him to complete it in a month in 1917.

*The Player Queen* was first performed by the Stage Society in London in May 1919, with Maire O'Neill (Molly Allgood, *Playboy's* original Pegeen Mike) playing Decima, the eponymous Player Queen. Yeats had been sceptical of the play's quality but found himself laughing and applauding heartily, amazed that the rest of the audience responded rather less expansively (Yeats 2001, 698.) In December of that year, *The Player Queen* opened at the Abbey Theatre in a staging by Lennox Robinson, who commented that he found it "most delightful, most annoying, and most unsatisfactory", adding that he had "very little idea what the play is about" (qtd. in Becker, 84). In its final version, *The Player Queen* is a wild farce set in a medieval folk-tale atmosphere in a nameless town, over which looms a crenelated royal castle. The play begins as the kingdom is on the verge of an insurrection. The Queen has reigned for seven years but has never shown her face to the people, preferring to live in saintly seclusion and to leave the affairs of the kingdom to the Prime Minister, and the townsfolk no longer trust her. The Prime Minister has invited a company of itinerant players to perform a play about Noah's Ark in the castle in front of all the citizens, thereby hoping to quell the insurrection, but Septimus's wife Decima, who is to play Noah's wife, refuses to don the grotesque mask of an old woman and has gone missing, driving Septimus to drunken despair. While Septimus rants about his "bad wife" and the citizens debate whether or not the Queen is a witch, an Old Beggar appears clamouring for straw to lie upon because, he says, sometimes he is possessed by the spirit of a donkey and when he brays, the current monarch dies and "the crown changes". As the sun rises, the angry mob gathers around the castle and the Queen announces that she is ready for martyrdom, in emulation of her role model Holy Saint Octema. Decima comes out of hiding and Nona, another player in the company, tries to coax her into playing her part. When Decima refuses haughtily, arguing that she was cut out to play the part of a queen, Nona reveals that she is Septimus's lover. As the mob becomes more threatening and all the players escape (most of them dressed as the animals on Noah's Ark), the humiliated Decima stays behind and contemplates suicide, but is interrupted by the Queen who confesses that she is not prepared to suffer martyrdom, after all. Decima offers to take her part and dons the royal dress and crown, while the queen escapes to a convent.

The Prime Minister enters with a Bishop and reveals his plan to marry the Queen and become King in order to pacify the mob. He discovers that Decima has replaced the Queen but marries her anyway. The Old Beggar brays and is condemned to death as an impostor. Decima addresses the mob in queenly fashion and wins them over, and then banishes the unwifed Septimus along with the other players.

Unsurprisingly, many critics have tended to share Robinson's perplexity,<sup>2</sup> or have sought to read the play as a dramatisation of Yeats's theory of mask and of his cyclical conception of history, despite Yeats's confession that this allegorical impulse was precisely what he had to get rid of in order to find a satisfactory shape for the play. Of course, such a reading is at least partly legitimate. Decima, harlot-begotten and, as Nona reveals, "born in a ditch between two towns and wrapped in a sheet that was stolen from a hedge" (Yeats 2001, 352), yearns to play "a great queen", even if this means facing death, and because she dons the mask of her Anti-Self and plays the part to perfection, imitating the image of an ideal Queen, she truly becomes that Queen. Whether or not her access to the throne actually brings about "the end of the Christian era, the coming of a New Dispensation" (358), as Septimus prophesies in terms later systematised in Yeats's apocalyptic doctrine of the succession of primary and antithetical gyres in *A Vision*, is more debatable. Certainly, a new monarch of lowly extraction succeeds to the Queen, but as Daniel Jean points out, the substitution of a simulacrum (the Player Queen) for the real queen is in the interest of preserving social stability, not of revolution: "The apocalyptic Second Coming . . . is replaced in this play by a change imperceptible to the people. The crowd remains unaware of the substitution, verifying the motto that everything must change so that nothing appears to change." (Jean 452) Yet I would argue that the seamless transition from Queen to Player Queen amounts to more than a mere case of "*plus ça change*": a real, momentous change does occur, although Septimus is too absorbed by his own vision of apocalypse to even perceive it, let alone give it adequate expression. This change, which Septimus consistently ignores, concerns Decima's elevation from Player Queen to Queen, and more generally, gender politics.

The play is firmly anchored in the world of farce, and imbued with a violence that affects all interactions in the life of the townsfolk. This is a world of clowns, and when Septimus appears blind drunk and bawling for his fugitive wife, he is rolled over into a street corner, doused with a jugful of water, and knocked out cold by a cantankerous countryman—and we laugh because we know that none of this is really going to hurt him. However, there is another, more sinister kind of violence which suffuses the play. This is a time of generalised frustration and unrest: the people are not happy with their Queen, and

an angry mob is forming to overthrow her. Yet they have no quarrel with the monarchy itself as an institution, and would be happy to have the Prime Minister, who is already ruling the country, ascend the throne. But the Queen fails to play her part properly and refuses to show her face, and therefore is suspected of being a witch. In the first scene, we follow the process by which an outlandish rumour, mediated through multiple, singularly unreliable sources, solidifies into a fact. The Tapster (whose profession it is to provide intoxicating liquor for his peers) testifies that his neighbour, a certain “Strolling Michael”, following his goat which is “always going astray” (Yeats 2001, 343), arrived at the castle and glimpsed the Queen “coupling with a great white unicorn” (344). The story resonates with the medieval motif of “the Lady and the Unicorn,” as represented in the celebrated late medieval tapestries acquired by the Cluny Museum in Paris in 1882, which Yeats visited in 1897.<sup>3</sup> In the Cluny tapestries, as in later Renaissance and baroque paintings, the unicorn is an emblem of purity and the embrace symbolises the spiritual nature of the virginal Lady, but in the pedestrian world of *The Player Queen* there is no room for spirituality, and the crowd interprets the Tapster’s story literally, as an instance of monstrous bestiality, confirming the suspicion that the Queen is indeed a witch. The crowd is divided as to what is to be done, but the most vocal speaker is a Big Countryman who repeatedly points out that he has already strangled a witch with “with [his] own two hands” (342) and readily offers his services to deal with the present case.

The motif of the witch-hunt taps into a medieval imagination in which women who do not conform to a strict set of norms and social expectations and refuse to be controlled by men are constructed as morally perverse and severely punished. Ever since she succeeded her late father on the throne, the timid Queen has declined to act as the Queen and to appear in public; she has also remained single and has failed to produce an heir to the throne, and her religious calling is perhaps to be read as a way of evading patriarchal control. The Prime Minister’s solution for the crisis is fairly straightforward: he will marry the Queen and become King himself, using her person and body as a tool to ascertain his personal power. In the meantime, to quell the mob’s anger, he has invited Septimus and his players to perform “‘The Tragical History of Noah’s Deluge’ because,” he says, “when Noah beats his wife to make her go into the Ark everybody understands, everybody is pleased, everybody recognizes the mulish obstinacy their own wives, sweethearts, sisters” (349). It is striking in this cue that “everybody”, repeated three times, does not include women –who are excluded from the body politic and universally assumed to be in need of a sound beating. The chosen play within the play symbolically punishes the Queen for her own “mulish obstinacy”, and warns all the women in the kingdom about the violence

that will be unleashed on them should they refuse to board the patriarchal ark. While male profligacy is a given in the play (this is established from the beginning when Septimus encounters two men comparing notes as they emerge from a brothel at dawn), the whole play is steeped in Biblically-sanctioned misogyny. The psychopathic witch-strangling Big Countryman invokes the Scriptures to justify his hobby: “The Bible says, Suffer not a witch to live. Last Candlemas I strangled a witch with my own hands” (342) and the Prime Minister’s favourite ejaculation, “Sleep of Adam!”, repeatedly makes the point that women are assumed to be responsible for the Fall and everything that subsequently went wrong on earth.

In this context of generalised Church- and State-sanctioned violence against women, Decima’s rise to power is remarkable, and signifies at least the possibility of change. Her obsession with the role of the Queen may smack of childish narcissism, yet by the end of the play her performance is so convincing that she conquers the respect of the mob and single-handedly deflects the revolution. She also outwits the Prime Minister in the bargain, who in marrying her confirms her queenly status. Instead of the mystical union of the Virginal Queen and Unicorn which Septimus envisages as the usherer of the New Dispensation, the marriage of Decima and the Prime Minister is a pragmatic matter of realpolitik and Decima’s ambiguous final cue, addressed to the players from under the smiling comedic mask of Noah’s sister, shows that she is well aware of the risk she has taken in joining her fate to that of a dodgy politician:

A woman player has left you. Do not mourn her. She was a bad, headstrong, cruel woman, and seeks destruction somewhere and with some man she knows nothing of; such a woman they tell me that this mask would well become, this foolish, smiling face! Come, dance. (368)

This speech, salvaged from earlier tragic versions of the play, reveals both Decima’s awareness of the precariousness of her situation at the end of the play (she certainly knows nothing of the man she has just tricked into marriage and may well be heading towards destruction) and her mastery of subtle role-playing. Noah’s sister, according to Septimus (who wrote the play), “was drowned because she thought her brother was telling lies” (360) –yet another instance of a woman punished for not complying with the dictates of patriarchy, though it is her foolishness, as imprinted on her mask, rather than her wish for emancipation, which is blamed for her gruesome end. By wearing the mask of the foolish woman, Decima simultaneously hides her real face from the players who could yet

confound her as an impostor, rids herself of Septimus, bidding him a grinning farewell and, in parodying patriarchal discourse which constructs wilful women as “bad, headstrong, cruel” and doomed to “destruction”, implicitly warns the Prime Minister that she will not simply submit to patriarchal rule but will fight for her share of power. The final dance evokes the baroque masques which were performed at the court of Elizabeth 1 and ended with a dance in which the queen joined, symbolising her power to ensure harmony and peace in the kingdom. Patriarchy has certainly not been overcome by the end of the play, revolution has been averted, and what change may be wrought by the new royal couple is yet completely undecided, but a wilful woman has come into her own and taken her destiny in her own hands, driving a wedge in the patriarchal edifice.

Although gender politics is at the heart of *The Player Queen*, this aspect has generated relatively little interest among the play’s commentators, perhaps because they tend to follow Septimus’s cue in looking the other way. Septimus’s reaction when he hears the story of the Queen’s alleged debauchery is characteristically eccentric:

First Countryman. And did he say what she was like?

Tapster. He saw more than that. He saw her coupling with a great white unicorn.

*[Murmurs among the crowd.]*

Second Countryman. I will not have the son of the unicorn to reign over us, although you will tell me he would be no more than half a unicorn.

First Countryman. I’ll not go against the people, but I’d let her live if the Prime Minister promised to rout her out of bed in the morning and to set a guard to drive off the unicorn.

The Big Countryman. I have strangled an old witch with these two hands, and today, I will strangle a young witch.

Septimus *[who has slowly got up and climbed up on to the mounting-stone which the Tapster has left]*: Did I hear somebody say that the Unicorn is not chaste?

It is a most noble beast, a most religious beast. It has a milk-white skin and a milk-white horn, and milk-white hooves, but a mild blue eye, and it dances in the sun. I will have no-one speak against it, not while I am still upon the earth.

(344)

While the people are busy debating (with farcical ineptitude) the pressing matter of the Queen’s fate and of the kingdom’s future, Septimus steps in like a knight in shining armour to defend the honour—not of the slandered queen, but of the Unicorn. From this moment to the end of the play, Septimus becomes engrossed in his own vision of the

Unicorn, which to him (but to him only) is a symbol of beauty and chastity, such as must unite with a mortal woman to engender the New Dispensation. It is at this point that the play poses a serious challenge to the audience. In an otherwise brilliant reading of the play, William Becker claims that the esoteric subtext of the play is accessible to an uninitiated audience, provided we are willing to listen to Septimus: the play, he insists, “provides its own context of thought within which the action may be seen as fully comprehensible. The only demands made are a certain alertness and a willingness to participate” (Becker 98). I find this claim disingenuous and am sceptical of the capacity (or indeed willingness) of an audience completely unacquainted with Yeats’s arcane thought to fully engage with, let alone make sense of, Septimus’s prophetic rants such as:

Septimus: Gather about me, for I announce the end of the Christian Era, the coming of a New Dispensation, that of the New Adam, that of the Unicorn; but alas, he is chaste, he hesitates, he hesitates.

Stage Manager: This is not a time for making up speeches for your new play.

Septimus: His unborn children are but images; we merely play with images.  
(*CW2*: 358)

On the contrary, I would argue that Yeats fully anticipates the audience’s failure to understand what Septimus is talking about, and that this failure – which we may rephrase more accurately as Septimus’s failure to make himself understood – is at the core of the play’s comic DNA. This failure is mediated by the response of the onstage audience – all the characters who interact with Septimus and can’t make head or tail of what he is talking about. There is in fact not a single moment when another character actually listens to Septimus and engages with his vision. Certainly, there is an affinity between Septimus’s rants about the Unicorn and Yeats’s own apocalyptic vision. My contention, however, is that the play is not so much a staging of, or even a mockery of, Yeats’s arcane philosophy, as a meditation about the gap between the artist’s vision and the public’s readiness to receive it.

In “Ego Dominus Tuus”, the dialogical poem that serves as an introduction to *Per Amica*, the idealistic “Ille” gives a poignant description of the artist’s existential solitude:

The rhetorician would deceive his neighbours,  
The sentimentalist himself; while art  
Is but a vision of reality.  
What portion in the world can the artist have

Who has awakened from the common dream  
But dissipation and despair? (*Yeats 1994*, 3)

The passage taps into the classic imagery of the cave allegory in Plato's *Republic* or the Veil of Maya in Hindu philosophy: ordinary people have access only to the "common dream" of illusion, while "reality" lies beyond, accessible only through a transcendent "vision." Yet the artist who accesses this "vision of reality" will likely not be heard and is doomed to lifelong "dissipation and despair": the poem endows the figure of the artist with a tragic aura, and implicitly suggests that in a world ensconced in materialism his voice can never be heard, or his vision shared. In keeping with the romantic tradition, the trope of poetic failure paradoxically serves to magnify the figure of the poet, and to disparage his philistine contemporaries. In *The Player Queen*, however, similar issues are broached in more ambiguous terms. Septimus is the comic version of the *poète maudit*, who fails to share his vision because those he addresses are simply too prosaic to care. His utter redundancy is signified by the fact that there is another apocalyptic prophet in the play: the enigmatic Old Beggar who is feared as much as Septimus is ignored. A grotesque parody of Septimus, the Old Beggar does not put his vision into words but brays like a donkey, a mode of expression clearly more accessible to the crowd than Septimus's complicated flights of rhetoric. While the Old Beggar's prophecy concerns only the affairs of the state, Septimus's vision encompasses a much more momentous event, the demise of one civilisation and the emergence of another, but whether or not this will happen remains beyond the scope of the play: the point is that no-one listens.

This is intimated implicitly in the intriguing dialogue between the two "Old Men" who appear at the beginning and end of the first scene, a clownish duet who reminds me in equal measure of Nagg and Nell, sticking out of their respective dustbins in Beckett's *Endgame*, and of Statler and Waldorf, the two old hecklers in the stage box in the Muppet Show. In proto-Beckettian fashion, the two Old Men appear "*leaning from the upper windows, one on either side of the street*" so that only their respective trunks are visible, and "*wearing grotesque masks*", and they perform a daily ritual of assessing their situation, evaluating each other's ailing bodies in the process: "Can you see the queen's castle? You have better sight than I." "Do you hear anything? You have better hearing than I." (*Yeats 2001*, 337-38) Evidently this scene must have been an inspiration for the equivalent ritual of mutual auscultation in *Endgame*: "Can you see me?—Hardly. And you?—Hardly . . . Our sight has failed. Can you hear me?—Yes. And you?—Yes. (*Pause.*) Our hearing hasn't failed.—Our what?—Our hearing." (*Beckett 99*) In *The Player Queen*, the dialogue of

the two Old Men sets the comic tone of the play (with their grotesque masks they gesture towards the *senex iratus* of *comedia dell'arte*) and serves an expository function, giving us basic information about the time and place of the action, but something more important is at stake here. The two Old Men have stepped out of the public arena; they no longer participate in the life of the city, but are mere spectators of the agitation of public affairs which they leave to “the young and the middle-aged” (Yeats 2001, 338). Yet at the close of their first appearance, as action proper is about to start, they leave the stage entirely and commit themselves to darkness again, like jacks-in-the-box, for fear they might be implicated in the violent events which are under way. “We had best pull in our heads”, one says, “The world has grown very wicked and there is no knowing what they might do to us or say to us,” and the other responds, “Yes, better shut the windows and pretend to be asleep.” (339) They reappear very briefly at the end of scene one, once the insurrection has started and the mob has vacated the streets and reached the castle:

First Old Man. It is all right now. They are all gone. We can have our talk out.

Second Old Man. The whole Castle is lit by the dawn now, and it will begin to grow brighter in the street.

First Old Man. It's time for the Tapster's old dog to come down the street.

Second Old Man. Yesterday he had a bone in his mouth. (348)

The passage makes little sense, except perhaps if we read it as a parable about spectatorship. The two Old Men could have been in the front row while the angry mob assembled and marched towards the Castle, but they have chosen to see nothing of these extraordinary events, and register only the trivial details of daily routine, with its minute, insignificant variations. They would rather remain in the dark, dreaming “the common dream”, than take the risk of looking beyond the realm of the known and familiar.

At one level, then, I argue that the two Old Men are figures of the incompetent, reluctant spectator, such as Septimus encounters repeatedly throughout the play. They are the philistine audience who fails to share the artist's vision, condemning him to “despair and dissipation”. Yeats was clearly still processing the scathing memory of the *Playboy* riots at the time of writing *The Player Queen*, but the play also paves the way for the dramaturgy of the *Plays for Dancers*, which he started writing in January 1916, as he was still plodding through the later versions of *The Player Queen*. The Noh-inspired dramaturgy of the *Plays for Dancers* rests on the apparition of an otherworldly entity in the everyday world; however, this extraordinary apparition is mediated through a passive figure whose role is to

witness it, to receive the playwright's vision and thus to make it real. In *The Dreaming of the Bones*, for instance, the audience only sees the two ghosts because they appear to the Young Man, who is prepared to receive this vision from the otherworld even though he refuses to sympathise with the ghosts. With the *Plays for Dancers*, Yeats invents an epiphanic theatre, in which something previously unknown and inconceivable is revealed. Crucially, the plays self-reflexively incorporate a figure of the competent spectator, creating the condition for their own viability. With *The Player Queen*, it is as if Yeats had first needed to exorcise his fear of never encountering an audience prepared for the otherworldly vision he had to share, before he realised that such an audience could be created in the plays themselves, as an intrinsic part of his dramaturgy of vision.

However, I would also argue that reading Septimus as a comic transposition of the tragic figure of the *poète maudit* is a bit of an oversimplification. If Septimus fails to share his vision, it is also because he is so wrapped up in his prophetic reverie that *he*, too, fails to see what is actually going on in the world. Like the two Old Men, Septimus sticks to what he thinks he knows (his symbolic conception of the Unicorn) and refuses to attend to the very real change that is happening before his eyes—Decima's emancipation from her role as a muse for Septimus, her transformation into the Queen she always wanted to be, her ambiguous alliance with and deception of the Prime Minister, the ultimate patriarch. Septimus too has been an incompetent spectator to Decima's brilliant performance which has effectively brought about something entirely new in the kingdom, the possibility of somewhat unsettling patriarchal rule and of making space for female desire. Septimus fails to catch the attention of his audience because he fails to pay attention to what is actually going on in the world, preferring to attend to a vision disconnected from earthly affairs—a vision which is, in other words, redundant.

In its glorious wackiness, then, I have argued that *The Player Queen* does a number of things. It stages the transformative journey of one strong woman of lowly extraction who dares to act according to her own desire and makes it to the throne, quietly challenging the Prime Minister and the patriarchal order on which his authority rests in the bargain. It reflects on the conditions of possibility of art and points out that the validity of the artist's vision depends on the public's capacity to receive it, thus anticipating the dramaturgy of the Noh-inspired *Plays for Dancers* which incorporate their own figure of the competent spectator. Finally, it also makes the point forcefully that the artist's vision is redundant if the artist himself is an incompetent spectator, too engrossed in his otherworldly vision to attend to what is going on in the real world. While the fictional poet Septimus is punished for his self-absorption, I am tempted to read Yeats's refusal to let go

of *The Player Queen* until he had finished it (or perhaps the play's refusal to let *him* go) as his way of exorcising the fear of becoming so absorbed with his own budding vision, or *Vision*, that he might become blind to the real world, and irrelevant as a public figure. In its final, farcical incarnation, the play, allowing him to attend both to his vision and to his responsibility as a privileged witness to the affairs of the world, is a decisive step on his way to his consecration in Stockholm.

## Notes

- 1 The Nobel Prize in Literature 1923. NobelPrize.org. Nobel Prize Outreach AB 2023. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1923/summary/> Accessed 28 Nov 2023.
- 2 Cf. Sumiko Sugiyama, "What is *The Player Queen* All About?", in *Irish Writers and the Theatre*, ed. Masaru Sekine (Gerrards Cross, Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe, 1986), 179.
- 3 W.B. Yeats, letter to Fiona McLeod, undated [12 January 1897?]: "I have just finished a certain speech in 'The Shadowy Waters', my new poem, & have gone to 'The Cafe de Musee du Cluny' to smoke & read the Irish news in the Times." Yeats, *The Collected Letters*.

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